

Geography and History Activity

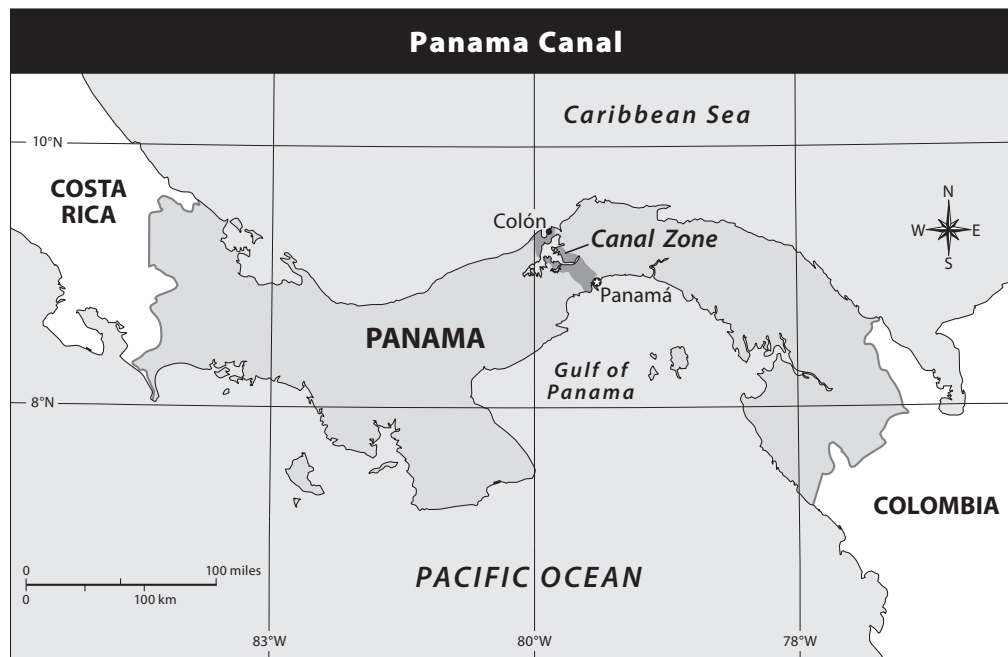
networks

Becoming a World Power, 1872–1917

The Panama Canal

Dreaming and Building the Canal

As early as the 1500s, the Spanish began imagining a canal to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans across the narrow isthmus of Central America. American interest in such a canal developed after the Civil War, when American politicians and businessmen wanted to find ways to knit together the national economy more tightly. A shortened sea route from the East Coast to the West Coast would have helped immensely. The French company that built the Suez Canal began work on the Panama Canal in 1880, but this attempt was abandoned in 1893. In 1904 the United States bought out the French interests and took up the project, eventually completing it in 1914.



Caption: Panama's geography made building the canal a challenge. Although the distance across Panama is the shortest in Central America, the center of the country is much higher than sea level. To overcome this obstacle, engineers had to design and build a series of lakes and concrete locks to raise and lower ships up and over the country's high central plateau.

How Does Geography Affect the Canal?

For most of human history, going by sea was potentially the most comfortable and least perilous way of traveling long distances. Although sea travel involved hazards of weather, waves, and navigation, travel by land often involved worse hazards, including geographic obstacles and hostile inhabitants. Before railroads, highways, and airplanes, a sea trip from New York to San Francisco would have been far less fraught with danger and uncertainty than a horse-drawn wagon journey across 3,000 miles of rugged terrain—but *only if* that sea trip didn't involve going all the way around the distant and treacherous Strait of Magellan at the tip of South America. The construction of the

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Panama Canal shorted that sea trip from over 13,000 miles to less than 5,300 miles, cutting the time by more than half and eliminating the most dangerous portion of the journey. Even with railroads, it was not until the 1950s—when interstate highways and jet airplanes eased coast-to-coast trips—that travel by sea was eclipsed as the safest, most comfortable way of getting all the way across the United States. Although boat trips from coast to coast are quite uncommon today, the sea route is an effective and widely used route for cargo transportation.

Directions: Answer the questions below in the space provided.

Understanding Concepts

1. Why do you think there was such interest in building a canal to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans?

2. Why do you think the Panama site was ultimately selected for the canal?

Applying Concepts

3. Think about trips you have taken. What are some of the benefits of finding shorter routes other than simply saving time?

4. Today, personal travel is usually accomplished in cars, trains, or airplanes. For what purposes is sea travel still used?

5. How do you think the world today benefits from the existence of the Panama Canal?
